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Exhuming Lorca's Grave — and Franco's Ghosts

By LISA ABEND / MADRID Thursday, Oct. 29, 2009



Members of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory erect a fence on the site where the remains of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca are believed to be buried
Pepe Marin / Reuters

One of the great mysteries of modern Spanish history may soon be solved. This week, a team of archaeologists and historians from the University of Granada began excavations of a mass grave located outside the southern town of Alfacar. For decades, the site has been suspected to hold the remains of the renowned poet and playwright Federico García Lorca, who was assassinated by the Nationalist Civil Guard in the early months of Spain's 1936-39 Civil War. For a country that has long suppressed its public memory of the conflict, the exhumation represents one more significant step on the road to making peace with its past. But this being Spain, where nearly every attempt to commemorate the war's victims or punish its perpetrators is still met with ambivalence, even the identification of the remains of its most famous victim is fraught with discord.

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In the Civil War and the nearly 40 years of dictatorship that followed, few events were cast in thicker shadows than the death of Lorca, known for such works as *Romancero Gitano* and *Blood Wedding*. He was arrested in Granada on Aug. 17, 1936, for "subversive" activities (in addition to being politically progressive, Lorca was gay). He was later taken from his cell and pushed into the back of a Civil Guard squad car. What happened after that remained a mystery until years later. In the 1950s and '60s, writers Gerald Brenan and Ian Gibson interviewed witnesses who said that Lorca had been driven outside the city with three other prisoners to a ravine between the towns of Viznar and Alfacar. The four were shot and buried in a mass grave. (See pictures of Spain.)

In the repressive atmosphere of the Franco regime, public discussion of the atrocity — and thousands of others — was prohibited. "Even within my family — my father, my grandparents, the grandparents who went into exile in New York and came back — it was never

spoken about," says Laura García Lorca, the poet's niece and president of the Madrid-based García Lorca Foundation. Even after Franco's death in 1975, a so-called pact of silence suppressed any kind of open debate about the crimes committed during his rule while the country peacefully transformed itself into a democracy.

Yet in the past 15 years or so, this silence has gradually given way to a cacophony of demands to come to terms with the past. Books and

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documentaries have focused on everything from the mass executions of people on both sides of the Civil War to the plight of the "lost" children sent into protective exile in the Soviet Union. In 2007, the Spanish parliament passed the Law of Historical Memory, providing pensions to soldiers who fought in the Republican army, denying the legitimacy of Franco's political trials and requiring the removal of all symbols of the Franco regime from public spaces. [\(Read "Franco Lives Again — on Spanish TV."\)](#)

Perhaps the most literal example of this desire to unearth buried history comes in the form of disinterments. For several years now, volunteers with organizations like the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) have spent their weekends digging up the remains of Republican sympathizers who were executed during the war. "The exhumations are the best way of closing the wounds of the past," says Santiago Macias, vice president of the Madrid-based ARMH. "They offer the families of victims a way to heal."

Yet it is also telling that each of these efforts — from the removal of Franco statues to the exhumations of graves — has met with vociferous resistance. "There's a right-wing backlash against this huge 'recovery of memory' movement," says prominent Spanish historian Paul Preston. "You're dealing with a really complicated social phenomenon here — the families of the beneficiaries of Franco's victory. All they've ever been told by their parents and grandparents was about how they did the right thing, smashing communism and all that, and now they're being told that these people were little better than Hitler. It makes them very uncomfortable."

[\(See pictures of the rise of Hitler.\)](#)

The exhumation of Lorca's remains has hardly been free of controversy. Last year, National Court Judge Baltasar Garzón indicted Franco and his officers retroactively for crimes against humanity and ordered the disinterment of the site to gather evidence. Faced with opposition from other judges who felt he was overstepping his jurisdiction, Garzón was later forced to reverse his decision and recuse himself from the case. The ARMH has also criticized the amount of public money being spent on one highly publicized grave exhumation. "There are thousands of others buried in mass graves in the same area, and their descendants aren't getting any help in recovering their remains," Macias says.



Lorca's relatives previously objected to the exhumation of his remains. "It's never mattered to us to know the exact location. We just wanted to have the place where he lies protected," says Laura García Lorca. "That's important for the memory of all the victims. Because of who he is, we think of him as a sort of guardian, ensuring the remains of all the others won't be disturbed or forgotten either." Earlier this month, the town of Alfácar granted that wish by declaring the site a cemetery.

[\(Read "At Last, Spain Faces Up to Franco's Guilt."\)](#)

Yet because the family members of two of the men presumably buried with Lorca — anarchist *banderillero* Francisco Galadí and teacher Dióscoro Galindo — wished to recover their remains, the poet's descendants have decided, at last, to allow the exhumation to happen. But the Lorca family has thus far declined to participate in the laborious DNA testing that geneticist José Lorente and his team will conduct on some of the remains. "If the family doesn't give us tissue samples for us to establish the [family] DNA, those remains will never be identified," Lorente says. It's a fittingly incomplete end for an emblematic figure in a war whose ghosts have yet to be put to rest.

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